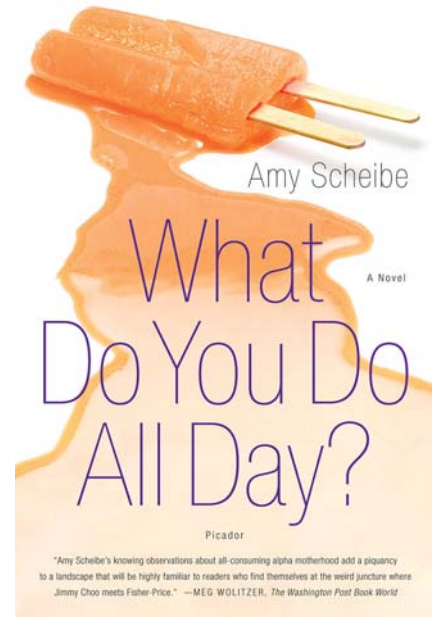


READING GROUP GUIDE

What Do You Do All Day? *A Novel*

by Amy Scheibe

ISBN: 0-312-42562-7



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *What Do You Do All Day?* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach the novel.

About the Book

What Do You Do All Day? is Amy Scheibe's quirky, personal depiction of stay-at-home mother Jennifer Bradley. Jennifer is a sophisticated Manhattan mommy who gave up her fabulous job to devote herself full-time to her children. But as much as she adores her children and her husband, and as much as she feels like she made the right decision, it still seems like something is missing from her life.

Jennifer begins to face her problems head-on when her husband, Thom, suddenly leaves for a three-month business trip to Singapore. Difficulties multiply between her and Thom while he is away, she is overwhelmed by having to care for the kids by herself, and, most distressing, Jennifer's parents reveal some unsettling secrets about their past. But encountering all of these difficulties turns out to be exactly what Jennifer needed to put her life in perspective. She learns to appreciate what she has while at the same time realizing her potential both as a mother *and* a

career woman. At times sarcastic and at times sincere, Amy Scheibe's depiction of Jennifer Bradley is sure to hit close to home for women everywhere experiencing the joys and tribulations of motherhood.

"Amy Scheibe's knowing observations about all-consuming alpha motherhood add a piquancy to a landscape that will be highly familiar to readers who find themselves at the weird juncture where Jimmy Choo meets Fisher-Price."

—Meg Wolitzer, *The Washington Post Book World*

"Scheibe wins us over with honest—and funny—observations of parenting minutiae."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Sharp, smart, and true. Hear one of the few fiercely independent and provocative voices in contemporary women's fiction tell you what it's really like on the inside."

—Laura Zigman, author of *Animal Husbandry*

"A fun read, jam-packed with witty barbs."

—Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus, authors of *The Nanny Diaries*

"Scheibe's hilarious debut is rife with wry observations. . . . With a light touch and a sparkling plot, she takes on the conundrums—and beauty—of motherhood for driven, yet nurturing women."

—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Amy Scheibe is an editor at a publishing house in New York City. She lives in the city with her husband and two children.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of the voice that Amy Scheibe creates for Jennifer? Her use of humor? Do you feel that Jennifer is an honest narrator, or is she sometimes unreliable?
2. How might this story have been different if Jennifer were a single-mom? How might it have been different if Jennifer and Thom lived out in the country instead of Manhattan? And what if Thom didn't travel so much? How might it have been different if it were set in the 1950s?
3. In chapter 11, Jennifer tells the story of going to visit Portia, her friend from high school who had triplets. Portia describes how she had been passed over for promotion and was thinking about quitting her job and becoming a stay-at-home mother. After making a pro and con list, Jennifer immediately tells Portia to keep her job. Why does she do that? Did Portia have an unrealistic idea of what being a stay-at-home mother would involve?
4. In chapter 12, Jennifer talks about her childhood and what it was like to grow up poor. She ties this in to the idea of wanting your kids to have a better life than the one you lived as a

kid. How does this desire affect the way Jennifer mothers Georgia and Max? Is this a positive driving force for Jennifer, or is it making her uptight?

5. Jennifer lists some of the contradictory advice out there for parents: “Sleep with your child, don’t sleep with your child, keep her squeaky clean, dirt wards off asthma. If you don’t put your child in day care, he won’t be socialized. If you do, he will be aggressive...” How do you think Jennifer decides which advice to follow? Do you think she makes the right decisions?
6. *What Do You Do All Day?* contains many child characters. What do you think are the challenges of writing characters who are children? What is the difference between a child and an adult on the page and what nuances of children’s behavior were revealed in this book?
7. On page 241, Jennifer realizes that Angie is a generous friend, and that she had done nothing to deserve it. Jennifer then comes to the conclusion that the reason Angie is such a good friend to her “is not because I’m special, but because Angie is.” How is Angie special? Do you think that a person needs to deserve to have good friends in order to have good friends, or is it just a matter of luck?
8. Do the events related to Bjorn’s criminal activity and his implication of Thom’s infidelity detract from Jennifer’s search for meaning, or do they put her struggle in better perspective? Would she have been able to make the decision to return to work if it hadn’t been for the difficulties with her husband?
9. If you had been in Jennifer’s situation and were presented with the evidence that Bjorn had given her that her husband had been cheating, would you have believed him? Would you have trusted Thom more than Jennifer did or would you have been just as suspicious?
10. Do you think Jennifer has a good relationship with her parents? How do you think it will be altered after learning the truth about her origins? Do you think she is good at handling her rocky relationship with Thom’s mother Vera? Why do you think Vera disapproves of Jennifer?
11. What do you think is the hardest thing about being a mother? The best thing about being a mother? Do you think Jennifer would agree? Why or why not?
12. Will Thom have some of the same difficulties that Jennifer had now that he is a stay-at-home father? Will it be different for him since he is a man? How should Jennifer support Thom? Are Jennifer and Thom able to maintain a marriage based on equality?
13. Do you think that part of the reason Jennifer feels the need to pursue her career is because there is a pressure in society to go out and work? Does Jennifer put pressure on herself? How does her self-identification as a feminist alter the way she looks at being a stay-at-home mother? Does it get in the way of her capacity to feel satisfaction as a mother? Or does it push her to achieve her potential as a person?

14. What do you think is the future of the Bradleys? Do you think that Jennifer will still keep her job after the third baby is born? Do you think that she will find satisfaction now that she is actually pursuing her own career? Do you think she will find it difficult not to spend more time with the children?

For more information on Picador Reading Group Guides:

Call: 646-307-5629

Fax: 212-253-9627

E-mail: readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com

For a complete listing of reading group guides visit: www.picadorusa.com

Picador

What to Read Next[®]

READ ON FOR AN INTERVIEW WITH

Amy Scheibe

Interviewer: What was your inspiration for writing What Do You Do All Day?

Amy Scheibe: A few things. One was a dear friend of mine who was in the thick of staying at home with two kids. She was both loving and feeling trapped by the particulars—the playdates with nannies, the desire for time of her own without feeling guilty, wanting to get back to her writing. She told me a funny story about a woman canceling a playdate at the last minute, but sending her nanny in her place and asking, “You do speak Spanish, don’t you?” and that started the idea.

What drove it from the first sentence, though, was a keen desire after having my first child to present an entertaining, yet issue-driven, novel about mothering. Much is written about mommy wars and the fork-in-the-road—that is, returning to the workplace or staying home—but so little of the nuance of the outcome of this decision is ever teased out and articulated. I wanted to try and show as many types of moms as I could, and to show that the dirty little secret about going back or staying home is that they both ultimately leave you, to some degree, yearning to do the other.

I: Is this book, then, about your own experience as a stay-at-home mom?

A. S.: If you consider maternity leave staying at home! No, the stay-at-home parts are really a homage to the women I know who do it day in and day out, because I don’t think I could do it—certainly not as well as they do. The media-driven “myth of the mommy war” gives little space to the idea that people are different and bring many kinds of talents to the parenting table. Mine happen to be with older children, and I may

find that when my kids are a little older, I'll want to be home for them. But I'm sure I'll still be working the hours when they are at school.

I: People often say that most first fiction is based on the writer's life. How much of What Do You Do All Day? is about you?

A. S.: I'd say about fifty percent, but exaggerated to make my life seem interesting enough to read about. For instance, I did date a man who acted when he was a child, but he's gone on to do other things and he was always very nice and fun to be around. Heath is much more sexy and dangerous than that. Like Jennifer, I also grew up in a trailer house and at the poverty level, and, though I've lived in New York City for more than twenty years, I still am that girl at heart and can be easily shocked when I hear that someone's kid has a pony! Not that there's anything wrong with that, but where I grew up, having a horse was something only the wealthy farmers could afford. I wanted to create that conflict inside of Jennifer—she's very aware that her problems are often luxury problems, but that doesn't mean they don't exist.

I: Where does the title come from?

A. S.: I originally wrote the book with the working title "Playdate," as I wanted to have every other chapter be about Jennifer going on playdates and meeting other mommies and nannies and daddies, but as time wore on, my agent felt less and less like tying the title to such an artificial conceit and tried to get me to rethink the title. At some point, another book came out called *Playdate* and she seized the moment to kill "Playdate." I was brainstorming with a friend and he asked, What is the one thing that Jennifer hates to hear? and the title just came out. I realized that this is the plight of the woman who stays at home—she is endlessly doing things that keep the household and the children and the marriage glued together and even so, at the end of the day, a man walks in, sees the place in chaos, and in a querulous tone says, "What do you do all day?" and

all the wonderful and beautiful and joyous things that mom has accomplished fly out the window. But the irony is that even those of us who work outside the home get asked that question. It's a human question, a conversation starter like, "How are you?" but it carries such a weight of duty and obligation when applied at the wrong moment.

I: How long did it take you to write the book?

A. S.: About nine months for the first finished draft, and then another three months of working with my editor.

I: So it was like having a baby?

A. S.: Exactly. In fact, it was after I had my first baby that I felt this surge of creativity that needed an outlet, and once I struck on the idea, the passion I had for mothers and babies just sort of flowed out of me in unexpected and surprising ways.

I: Jennifer at one point admits to being depressed. Do you think that depression occurs more in mothers?

A. S.: Actually, I think it may happen equally to mothers and non-mothers. It's not so much Jennifer spending all her time with children that makes her depressed, but she does have a tendency toward depression and buries her feelings in the quotidian duties of motherhood until they flow back up and overwhelm her when Thom leaves the country. It's so easy to fall into a pattern of extreme mothering where you get a little addicted to doing for your children first and more and more until one day you realize you've put the oxygen mask on them and not on yourself—exactly the opposite of what they tell you to do.

I: Why did you choose to have Jennifer conflicted about religion?

A. S.: I wanted her to find a way to deal with her problems without falling back on a construct that would ease her burden without her hav-

ing to work them out for herself. And I wanted her to find a way to impart morals to her children by using different religions. Living in New York City requires a huge amount of compassion and tolerance on a daily basis, and it's crucial that Jennifer be able to teach her kids how to navigate even if she can't connect to her own religious upbringing.

I: Why did you send Thom to Singapore?

A. S.: I needed to create a vacuum in Jennifer's life by tipping the responsibility balance out of her favor. Here she is, adjusting to the fact that she may have caused a nervous breakdown in her daughter simply by protecting her too much, then coming to terms with letting Georgia go when she's left completely responsible for the welfare of both children. This is enormous, and it gave me a way to surface Jennifer's resentment toward Thom simply for his ability to *leave*—whether it's every morning or for three months. This is not something she ever gets to do.

I: Though Jennifer has lived in New York for twenty years, she claims to never have had a friend who is black. How is that possible?

A. S.: For as much as America—and New York City, in particular—is a melting pot, the irony is that it is sometimes incredibly hard to cross the color line into true friendship. And Jennifer comes from a place that is pretty white, so her upbringing hasn't given her the cultural sensitivity required for her to make a true bond. I created Angie for a few reasons: to show that motherhood is the kind of bond that can transcend cultural differences; to portray as honestly as I could Jennifer's disappointment in herself that she is "tone deaf" in this way; and, ultimately, to give voice to a black character who goes against stereotypes.

I: Jennifer uses a lot of colorful language. Was that a conscious choice on your part?

A. S.: Jennifer is a colorful person, one who spends a lot of time with

small children and is not able to use all the words at her disposal. But she also spends a lot of time in her own head, where she's able to let off the steam of controlling her language by letting loose a little. I also think that curse words can serve as punctuation; where an exclamation point may not be strong enough to evoke just how frustrated one may feel in the moment, a quick four-letter word can sum it up pretty succinctly.

I: Your other career is editing books for a publishing house. How does it feel to be on the other side of the process?

A. S.: For the most part, it feels great. I have an advantage that most writers don't—I know the way things work, so nothing about being published is shrouded in mystery, and I can hear the bad news along with the good and anticipate things like deadlines (for instance, I've completely missed the deadline for this interview, but because I'm editing an author who has missed her deadline for a book coming out the same month, I'm well aware of the flexibility of said deadline. I also know that I better get this to my editor ASAP!). Basically, I just feel soooo lucky to be published at all because I know better than anyone just how hard it is for a novel to find a good editor.

I: Do you think being an editor gives you a competitive advantage for getting published?

A. S.: Absolutely, if you mean was it easy for me to find an agent, because my first job in publishing was at Knopf where my agent was then an editorial assistant. We've grown up in the business together. But that doesn't mean the material doesn't have to be good—I was held to the same standard as everyone else when it came to the novel being acquired.

I: Will there be a sequel?

A. S.: You never can tell.